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THE ARMORY FIGHTING BACK

The Westerly Armory is covered with scaffolding during its renovation and numerous cement blocks are stacked in piles in front of it.

(Sun photo by Susannah H. Snowden)

By Gloria Russell - The Sun Staff

WESTERLY - Saying that the rehabilitation of the historic Westerly Armory is at a "critical point," organizers behind the restoration project are seeking to raise \$60,000 by September to firm up a \$298,000 matching grant awarded in 2003 by the National Park Service.

Roberta Mudge Humble, who heads the Westerly Armory Restoration Inc. nonprofit corporation restoring the local landmark, said the project is moving toward revitalizing the building's structure, including the crenellation - or "crown" - that once graced the top of the building. The local Armory, located at Railroad Avenue and Dixon Street, is on the National Register of Historic Places and is one of 18 state historic armories.

Humble has scheduled a tribute for Friday, Aug. 12 at 10:30 a.m., to salute all who have helped make this restoration possible to date, with representatives from the town, the state and U.S. Sen.

Jack Reed, D-R.I. The volunteers will also have the opportunity to display the improvements undertaken so far.

But, nearly a decade and a million dollars after the project's launch, the rehabilitation process is still advancing, she said; a thorough revamping of the interior has been completed and now the final the task of repairing the structure itself is being tackled.

Humble said WAR Inc.'s directors must raise \$60,000 by September to complete the terms of the matching \$298,000 grant provided under the program administered by the National Park Service two years ago. A small amount from the original \$300,000 federal grant was cut by Congress. The award, a "Save America's Treasures" grant is one of about 80 awarded by the government annually.

The grant was obtained through the efforts of Reed with the understanding Armory officials would match the grant with non-federal funds within two years, Humble said. The Rhode Island Preservation Commission helped match it with \$100,000 and the Champlin Foundation with \$50,000, enabling the masonry and crenellation work to begin.

A new grant application will be submitted to the state for additional funds, but - even if approved - won't be forthcoming until late this year, according to Humble.

Under the auspices of WAR Inc., the major roof, dormers, gutters and main doors have been repaired and new sprinkler, heating and fire safety systems installed. An access ramp and improvements to the bathrooms and kitchen have been completed. Because the structural integrity has been severely compromised repairs to the exterior have begun.

The rehabilitation process began in 1996 after the state transferred the building to the town and WAR began applying for and receiving a number of grants.

"The Westerly community has not yet realized the vast importance of their armory," Humble says. "It is the symbol of American freedom and the largest memorial to both current and past service members in all of South County. It has a depth of character that represents the best American values.

"Together with the community, we need to complete the exterior of the building properly and return it complete with its crown of crenellations to the people for its new life of service to the community," she said.

The Armory was built in 1901-02, has been used by both the military and the community - and hosts a number of community events today. Among other roles, the Armory serves as "home" to the Westerly Band, and has been the site of festivals, lectures, workshops, antiques shows dances and classes, benefit concerts, job fairs and parties over the past few years.

"It is also a museum with community and military memorabilia," Humble noted, "and (can be used) as a gathering and departure location in state emergencies for troops in vehicles, or by train as mandated by the National Guard and Emergency Management Agency."

Humble says the Armory continues to stand as a tribute to the region's military service, past and present.

"During the time of war, it is important to remember we have troops 'out there,'" she said. "We tend to go about our daily living - go to the beach, the market, watch TV - and forget that our troops are in harm's way, often hot, with few facilities.

"The Armory remembers sacrifice - soldiers' time away, some of them wounded, some of them dead," she said. "It is important to remember sacrifices, past and present."